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Contemplative Practice: A Proposal in Reducing Novice Counselor's Performance Anxiety and Excessive Self-Focus

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Abstract

This article proposes the utilization of mindfulness meditation and other contemplative practices to help mitigate the challenges experienced by novice counselors when working with clients for the first time, namely, performance anxiety and an excessive self-focus marked by self-doubt, self-criticism, and fear of making a mistake. The author specifies forms of contemplative practice that have been used in counselor preparation and highlights their demonstrated value in developing therapeutic presence, enhancing self-compassion, supporting self-awareness, strengthen active listening and attention skills, and bolstering emotion regulation. The author presents a case study that illustrates the utility and integration of contemplative practice into a practicum course and overviews caveats and considerations of incorporating mindfulness meditation and other contemplative practices into one's pedagogy.

Keywords

Mindfulness, Meditation, Contemplative Practice, Performance Anxiety, Excessive Self-Focus

Author's Notes

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As counseling students begin seeing clients for the very first time, anxiety is high, self-doubt runs large, and a desire to do well dictates all. Researchers on counselor development note that novice counselors often experience acute performance anxiety (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003), excessive self-focus to the detriment of the client (Stoltenberg et al., 1998), and challenge with regulating their emotions (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003). It is common for beginning counselors to fixate on the "doing" of counseling (i.e., interventions), rather than simply "being" with clients through therapeutic presence (McCollum & Gehart, 2010). In effect, these counseling students may miss important opportunities to connect to their clients, and following the session, they may feel an onslaught of self-recrimination. Skovholt and Rønnestad (2003) stated that these experiences are universal to the journey of the novice counselor. Those of us who have supervised beginning counselors may find these phenomena come clearly to mind. Because of the inherent difficulties of the novice counselor, developing ways to attenuate these challenges are vital to consider. In this paper, contemplative practice is proposed as a viable avenue to address the acute performance anxiety and excessive self-focus that can plague beginning counselors, a case study is presented that details its utility and integration into a practicum course, and caveats and considerations in facilitating these practices are discussed.

Defining Contemplative Practice and Mindfulness

Contemplative practice has been defined as "structured and socially scaffolded activities that train skills by placing some constraint or imposing some discipline on a normally unregulated mental or physical habit" (Davidson et al. 2012, p. 147). Alternatively, Grossenbacher and Quaglia (2017) attested that contemplative practice can best be understood by a framework they termed contemplative cognition. This framework details the psychological components unique to all contemplative practices, which include attention, intention, and present-moment awareness. More

specifically, all contemplative practices share attention to an intended object of contemplation (e.g., focusing on the breath), intention to continuously attend to that object (e.g., coming back to breath when the mind wanders), and awareness of one's present-moment experience (e.g., awareness of the transient flow of one's thoughts as one engages with the breath).

Contemplative practice can encompass a multitude of forms, which includes anything from mindfulness meditation, beholding practices (e.g., deeply reflection on a phrase or image), movement practices (e.g., yoga, qigong, Tai Chi), concentration practices (e.g., Transcendental Meditation), compassion practices (e.g., Loving-Kindness Meditation), contemplative reading (e.g. lecto divina), contemplative writing (e.g., freewriting), and others. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society has developed a 'Tree of Contemplative Practices" that overviews various contemplative practices that can be utilized in the classroom, along with their potential usefulness, such as to cultivating presence (e.g., calm the mind, train attention, develop focus) or generating a beneficial attitude (e.g., gratitude, compassion, devotion) (Duerr, 2019).

Currently, mindfulness meditation is the most studied form of contemplative practice. It is a contemplative practice where an individual places their attention on some element of conscious experience (e.g., their breath, sounds in the environment, counting) (Tarrasch, 2015). When attention wanders, they redirect it back to their chosen object of attention. At its basis is a concept called mindfulness, which has been defined as focused attention to the present moment with an attitude of nonjudgment and acceptance (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). The act of developing mindfulness strengthens the "internal witness," a capacity where an individual learns to disentangle their thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations from who they are and observe these transient phenomena with diminished automatic and habitual reactivity (Tarrasch, 2015). Cultivating mindfulness has been shown to decrease emotional distress (Shapiro et al., 2007),

enhance attentional skills (Davidson et al., 2012), and cultivate greater self-compassion (Boellinghaus et al., 2014). As will be shared in later sections, these have important implications when training counseling students.

Mindfulness is deeply connected within the Buddhist tradition, and many contemplative practices have been developed from this Eastern philosophy (Kang & Whittingham, 2010). It is important to note, however, that many contemplative practices can be considered secular, with their central aim being to train one's attention and awareness. There is nothing students are expected to "believe," but they are instead encouraged to learn for themselves, through their own introspective engagement (Coburn et al., 2011).

How Contemplative Practice Can Reduce Performance Anxiety and Excessive Self-Focus

Contemplative practice has been demonstrated as an effective intervention in promoting emotion regulation (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher & Maris, 2010; McCollum & Gehart, 2010; Tarrasch, 2015), strengthening active listening (Goh, 2012; Jones et al., 2016) and attention skills (Davidson et al., 2011; Jha et al., 2007; MacLean et al., 2010; Semple, 2010; Tang et al., 2007), training therapeutic presence (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher et al., 2011; McCollum & Gehart, 2010), developing self-compassion (Christopher & Maris, 2010; Dorian & Killebrew, 2014; Schure et al., 2008), and enhancing self-awareness (Christopher et al., 2011; Goh, 2012; Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). These qualities are considered relevant training variables in counselor education and developing them can potentially help mitigate the performance anxiety and excessive self-focus that can plague beginning counselors. The following sections convey research that demonstrates the effectiveness of contemplative practice in supporting these qualities.

Contemplative Practice Can Be Used to Regulate Emotion

Contemplative practice has been shown to enhance emotion regulation (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Tarrasch, 2015), which is an important skill to offset the apprehension and performance anxiety beginning counseling students may experience (McCollum & Gehart, 2010). When exposed to distressing images, Wadlinger and Issacowitz (2011) found that long-term meditators had a greater ability to stabilize their affective response compared to non-meditators. Furthermore, regression analyses have found a strong association between dispositional mindfulness and emotion regulation (Goodall et al., 2012)

Contemplative practice uniquely promotes emotion regulation, whereas other attention-enhancing practices do not. Notably, Roberts-Wolfe et al. (2009) discovered that students who practiced meditation, learned to play an instrument, or learned to dance all had equal gains in attention and concentration. However, only the meditation group saw a significant improvement in emotion regulation. Furthermore, mindfulness meditation has been shown to be superior to relaxation practices in enhancing emotion regulation (Ditto et al., 2006). These findings make sense when considering mindfulness meditation as a way to systematically train diminished entanglement and reactivity towards habitual mental and emotional patterns.

Framing emotion regulation differently, counseling students have frequently reported that contemplative practice has helped them experience greater calm under stress (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher & Maris, 2010; McCollum & Gehart, 2010; Tarrasch, 2015). Contemplative practice has also been shown to decrease stress and negative affect in counseling students (Gutierrez et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2007). Christopher et al. (2006) designed a course to teach counseling students yoga, meditation, and qigong. Through a focus group at the end of the semester, students reported that the course assisted them in feeling calmer, less anxious, and

"better equipped, mentally and emotionally, to deal with the daily stress in their lives" (p.506). In a similar study, Chrisman et al. (2009) found that teaching qigong, a movement-based contemplative practice, is accessible and has immediate results for students. Some of these immediate results included feeling more energized yet relaxed, feelings of peace and calm, and a reduction of thinking. These all have implications for reducing anxiety and excessive self-focus in novice counselors, as they can promote greater calm, emotion regulation, and reduce negative affect.

Contemplative Practice Can Be Used to Promote Active Listening and Train Attention

Contemplative practices can bolster active-listening (Goh, 2012; Jones et al., 2016), which is an essential skill in mitigating the effects of performance anxiety and excessive self-focus. Goh (2012) conducted a study where she integrated mindfulness into a course for undergraduate social work students in order to help them foster active listening. Through self-reflection assessments, she had them measure "bad habits" that hindered active listening (i.e., mind-wandering, multitasking, and thinking ahead while listening to others). Throughout the length of the course, students were found to substantially decrease these previously unregulated bad habits. Notably, students reported that mindfulness helped them increase their awareness of these bad habits and trained them to instead give their full attention to the speakers they were engaged with. Consequently, as the students progressed throughout the course, they found themselves becoming better active listeners as they became better equipped at disengaging from their bad habits at active listening.

Related to active listening is the capacity to orient and sustain attention. Contemplative practice has consistently been shown to enhance attentional skills (Davidson et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2007). Notably, contemplative practice has improved attention related to orientating to the

object of one's attention (Jha et al., 2007). FMRI studies have shown that the areas of the brain associated with attention are more developed in participants who meditate, compared to a control group (Lazar et al., 2005). Furthermore, contemplative practices have been shown to enhance the capacity to sustain attention (MacLean et al., 2010; Semple, 2010). It can be conceptualized that enhanced attentional skills could be one way to support students in working through performance anxiety and excessive self-focus.

Contemplative Practice Can Be Used to Train Therapeutic Presence

Contemplative practice can help develop therapeutic presence (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher et al., 2011; McCollum & Gehart, 2010), and promoting therapeutic presence may be a way to offset performance anxiety and excessive self-focus in counseling students. In an effort to train therapeutic presence, McCollum and Gehart (2010) designed a mindfulness curriculum that they implemented within a practicum course. In this curriculum, they integrated into their course mindfulness exercises, assigned readings, journals/logs, and five to ten minutes of daily mindfulness practice outside of class. They spent 15-30 minutes of the 2 ½ hour class period to discuss and practice mindfulness; the rest of class time was business-as-usual. Through qualitative interviews, they discovered that the practicum students felt more compassion for themselves and their clients, were able to integrate a stronger quality of "being" into their counseling practice, and found themselves more present in the counseling room. Specifically, this presence strengthened greater awareness of the students' inner experience, awareness of their clients' experience, and discernment in acting from that combined awareness. Geller and Greenberg (2002) conceive that all of these qualities are assistive in the development of therapeutic presence.

Several other studies have demonstrated the value of contemplative practice in promoting therapeutic presence. Christopher et al. (2011) found that contemplative practices helped their students "let go of agendas and conceptualizations and be with the client in the moment" (p.33). A study by Shomaker and Ricard (2015) found that the clients of counseling students who attended a six-week mindfulness meditation intervention reported greater levels of attunement than the students who did not. Prominently, Dunn et al. (2013) found that having counseling students engage in a mindfulness centering exercise five minutes prior to their counseling session significantly assisted them in perceiving themselves to be more present during the session, compared to a control group. These researchers discovered that clients reported counseling students who engaged in the mindfulness centering practice as more effective than counseling students who did not. It could be argued that contemplative practice may help mitigate excessive self-focus and performance anxiety, and thereby support therapeutic presence in novice counselors.

Contemplative Practice Can Be Used to Promote Self-Compassion

Compassion practices can promote self-compassion, which can help mitigate against performance anxiety and excessive self-focus in beginning counseling students. Specifically, self-compassion has been associated with greater well-being in students (Neely et al., 2009); enhanced self-efficacy (Iskender, 2009); decreased self-criticism, anxiety, depression, and rumination (Neff, 2003; Shahar et al., 2016); and enhanced emotion regulation within professional psychotherapists and psychotherapists in training (Finlay-Jones et al., 2015). Lastly, counseling students have reported that self-compassion has lessened their degree of self-criticism, has heightened their tolerance of in-session anxiety and self-doubt, and has led to an improved sense of personal boundaries (Bell et al., 2017).

Qualitatively, counseling students have reported that the practice of mindfulness meditation has increased their level of compassion for self and others (Christopher & Maris, 2010; Dorian & Killebrew, 2014; Schure et al., 2008). Shapiro et al., (2007), found that the use of a mindfulness meditation intervention enhanced counseling students self-compassion compared to a control group. Promoting self-compassion, through contemplative practice, can assist counseling students in reducing anxiety and an excessive focus on self that manifests as self-doubt and self-criticism.

Contemplative Practices Can Be Used to Foster Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is an orientation to self that involves an understanding of what is occurring for oneself mentally, emotionally, physically, interpersonally, and existentially/spiritually. Contemplative practice has been found to be a valuable method for increasing self-awareness (Christopher et al., 2011; Goh, 2012; Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). It can be conceptualized that greater self-awareness, when coupled with self-acceptance, can help reduce the severity of performance anxiety and excessive self-focus that beginning counseling students may experience.

Napoli and Bonifas (2011) found that including contemplative pedagogical elements in their social work classroom resulted in significantly greater "observing" and "acting with awareness," as measured by the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness (KIMS). Specific items that students made significant gains on included becoming more aware of their feelings, noticing changes in their bodies, and recognizing when they were experiencing muscular tension. In a three-credit course, titled *Quality of Life*, Bonifas and Napoli (2014) facilitated both informal and formal mindfulness practices to enhance self-care and develop greater well-being. The course involved ten minutes of mindfulness practice to begin class, assigned journal articles discussing the relevance of mindfulness in counseling, group-based discussion on the assigned and their personal

practice, mindfulness-based workbooks, critical thinking reading logs, a research presentation, and a weekly personal journal to reflect on their mindfulness practices. Throughout the course, they found that students significantly developed greater awareness of their present moment action, enhanced observation skills, and an increased ability to accept themselves without judgment. It can be inferred that contemplative practice helped them to become more self-aware of their moment-to-moment internal experience, which could potentially help counseling students manage their performance anxiety and redirect attention from self. The following case study will demonstrate the potential for contemplative practice to be used as a means for enhancing self-awareness, along with other skills, in the novice counselor.

A Case Study Using Contemplative Practice to Reduce Excessive Self-Focus and Performance Anxiety

The following is a case study depicting the utility of contemplative practice in reducing excessive self-focus and performance anxiety in counseling students. In a practicum course, the instructor notices that the counseling students are experiencing palpable fear, apprehension, and self-doubt in working with clients for the first time. They report that they want to do well, are worried about not knowing what to say to their clients, are hypercritical of themselves, and have a general fear of making a mistake. Because of this, the instructor decides to engage the students in contemplative practices to help remediate these concerns. The instructor begins each class with five minutes of contemplative practice to begin training students to orient their attention, focus, and intention. These practices include body scans (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), Loving-Kindness meditation (Salzberg, 2002), mindfulness meditation on the breath, mindfulness meditation on body sensations, guided visualization grounding practices, and open-awareness meditation practices (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Following the contemplative practice, the instructor spends a few

minutes processing the experience with students and discusses some of the initial obstacles to the practice, which are detailed later in this paper.

Additionally, the instructor has the students engage in a five minutes of mindfulness meditation prior to working with each client. The instructor provides the rationale that the mindfulness practice can help them still their mind, calm their emotions, and engage their purpose and intentionality in working with their client. Specifically, the instructor invites the counseling students to visualize roots extending from the soles of their feet into the ground and invites them to follow the flow of the breath as it enters and leaves their body. Following the mindfulness meditation practice, the counseling students begin working with their clients.

As a result of these contemplative practices, these counseling students are likely to feel more present (Christopher et al., 2006; Dunn et al., 2013), they are better able to regulate their emotions (Campbell & Christopher, 2012; Christopher & Maris, 2010; McCollum & Gehart, 2010; Tarrasch, 2015), they are more tolerant of making a mistake (Burns et al., 2011), and they experience greater self-compassion and kindness towards themselves (Bell et al., 2017; Dorian & Killebrew, 2014). The clients of these counseling students experience their counselors as more effective in session (Dunn et al., 2013) and they experience greater symptom reduction in depression and anxiety, elevated optimism, and greater security in their social relationships (Grepmair et al., 2007). During follow-up supervision, the counseling students are better able to take in constructive feedback (Christopher & Maris, 2010), they are more eager to explore areas of growth (Bell et al., 2017), they are more apt to notice areas of countertransference and personalization issues (Christopher & Maris, 2010), they are better able to regulate activating emotions during supervision (Bell et al., 2017), and they can navigate ambiguity more effectively (Bohecker et al., 2016; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Maris, 2009).

Considerations for Using Contemplative Practices in Counselor Training

There are a number of considerations in implementing contemplative practices into the counseling classroom. For any beginning contemplative practitioner, it can take time and practice to integrate mindfulness into their way of being, as remembering to do it outside of formal practice can be an initial challenge (Aggs & Bambling, 2010). Additionally, McCollum and Gehart (2010) noted that regular contemplative practice can be difficult for counseling students to achieve in their active lifestyles; because of this, they require students practice outside of class as an assignment. When obtaining feedback for their course, students specifically asked for the practice to be an assignment to further incentivize follow-through.

Another consideration for utilizing contemplative practices is to be aware that students may struggle with the practices and with mindfulness as a way of being, initially. In supporting students with the obstacles for beginning practitioners, McCollum and Gehart (2010) recommended that counselor educators facilitate weekly discussions of students' practice in order to provide group support for the challenges and hiccups that occur along the way. For example, students may also believe that mindfulness is meant to induce relaxation, and while this can occur as a byproduct, the main point is to bring acceptance to their present moment experience (Campbell & Christopher, 2012). Another challenge that can occur is that beginning practitioners may expect to be able to still their thoughts immediately and become disappointed or frustrated with themselves if this experience does not occur right away (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). These types of challenges can be remediated through group discussion that validate the prevalence of the experience, as well as instructor support in encouraging dispositional attitudes towards the challenges. Furthermore, group discussions can be helpful for beginning practitioners to hear the success stories of students who have been practicing longer and have reaped more of the benefits of contemplative practice.

Based on qualitative research, Christopher et al. (2006) suggest that students may vary in the types of contemplative practices they prefer. For example, they suggest that students with more cognitive stress (i.e., an overactive mind) may prefer movement practices such as yoga, qigong, or walking meditation. Students who have more somaticized stress may prefer a sitting meditation like mindfulness of the breath. Other researchers have found some students greatly favor compassion practices, such as Loving-Kindness Meditation, while others did not prefer it at all (Leppma & Young, 2016). As an instructor, it can be helpful to provide a variety of practices so students can find one that best suits them.

Another consideration in the use of contemplative practices is that not every counselor educator is going to prefer it as philosophy or methodology. As Palmer (1998) notes, a pedagogy is only as powerful as the instructor's authentic congruence with it. In order for contemplative practices to be useful in the classroom, the instructor not only needs to support its use, but they must practice it themselves. As Campbell and Christopher (2012) stated, it must become a way of being for its practitioners and this requires deeply connecting to themselves and the present moment when teaching about it, or as they phrase it, "teaching from within." Additionally, numerous issues may arise when students engage in contemplative practice for the first time (to be discussed in the following section), and instructors should be aware of these issues so they can support their students; therefore, a personal practice is essential, and training and guidance on facilitating the practice is highly recommended (Crane et al., 2012).

Another important consideration in using contemplative practices is to be aware if the practice has strong religious or cultural ties. In light of the cultural origins of some contemplative practices, many scholars and practitioners advise noting the origins and history of these practices and concepts when they directly come from an established school of thought, religion, or

philosophy (Coburn et al., 2011). Furthermore, they advise against facilitating contemplative practices that specifically come from a religious tradition, unless the individual has been given instruction and permission from a verified teacher of that tradition (Coburn et al., 2011). The concept of cultural appropriation is a contentious issue today and one that requires due consideration when promoting these practices. There have been programs and practices developed that can be considered secular however, with Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) as two notable examples.

A final consideration for the implementation of contemplative practices is that counselor educators must provide students a rationale for the practices. As Caldwell (2012) highlights, some practices might not appear to be relevant to skill-development to students, so introducing them with a rationale can go a long way in garnering support for the practices. Examples of rationales for practice can include emphasizing that it will assist in developing counseling skills, empathy, or therapeutic presence; that it is an excellent means of providing self-care; or that it can catalyze neuroplasticity, decrease mind-wandering, or enhance cognitive functioning.

Caveats to Using Contemplative Practices in Counselor Training

There are a few caveats to contemplative practice that merit attention. The first caveat is the understanding that contemplative practice can sometimes trigger internal states that may cause discomfort or distress in students. Utilizing mindfulness, or any other form of self-reflection, builds internal awareness of psychological material that may have been previously absent, neglected, or "stuffed." Consequently, using contemplative practices can surface emotional or psychological issues that may require professional support (Campbell & Christopher, 2012). By communicating this to students, letting them know it is a possibility, and prefacing that it does not mean there is anything truly "wrong," but rather, they can work through issues they may have been

neglecting, students can be supported in the process (Coburn et al, 2011). Bibeau et al. (2015) furthered that the surfacing of this material is beneficial in the sense that students are able to be in contact—and subsequently process through—their personal pain and suffering during the practice, rather than having their clients' wounds and suffering activate it later.

A second caveat to the practice is that mindfulness meditation, in addition to some forms of contemplative practice, has traditions with Buddhism, which some individuals could conflate as a religious practice. While many forms of contemplative practice are secular, Coburn et al. (2011) states that if there was a refusal to engage in the practice due to religious reasons, an instructor could instead give the student an alternative assignment or practice that is equivalent in value. Furthermore, these practices are meant to train attention and self-awareness and as such, they place greater emphasis on student's "inner authority" rather than dogma or beliefs, and as such, are well-suited for academia and critical thinking.

A third caveat to the practice is that some students simply may not want to engage in the practice, which leaves room for dialogue on whether it should be required or not. Offering the courses as electives can assist in that process. Additionally, when offering contemplative practice within already existing Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) courses, giving students the option to not participate has been a preference for some counselor educators. However, Tarrasch (2015) found that when students were required to practice meditation for successful completion of practicum, all students reported experiencing considerable benefit. Having a dialogue with students and obtaining feedback throughout the course can be one way to navigate group consensus on the use of contemplative practices, though it is likely up to the counselor educator to make the best determination.

Limitations and Future Research

No intervention is going to be perfect for everyone and the same applies to contemplative practice. While this limitation is inherent in all interventions, contemplative practice is a promising avenue to counselor development in that it can support counselor skill-development and address the performance anxiety and excessive self-focus that can befall beginning counseling students. It is up to the counselor educator to determine if they wish to incorporate contemplative practices into their classroom and if they have the attitudinal disposition and training to maintain integrity to the practice (Crane et al., 2012).

In addition, more research on the use of contemplative practices within counselor education is needed. While there have been a number of study designs that have sought to illuminate the benefits of contemplative practices, more research is needed to validate the results. Future research studies could explore the impact contemplative practice has on performance anxiety and excessive self-focus, manifested though self-doubt, self-criticism, and a fixated concern on one's performance. Future quantitative studies could address effect sizes for the gains made in courses that that use contemplative practice to mitigate performance anxiety and excessive focus on self (Christopher et al., 2006). Additionally, future studies could explore the specific contemplative practices counselor educators would use to address performance anxiety and excessive self-focus.

Conclusion

The aforementioned challenges of emotion regulation, performance anxiety, and an excessive self-focus remain some of the biggest obstacles for novice counselors, and contemplative practices have consistently demonstrated their ability in remediating these challenges (Bell et al., 2017; Bohecker et al., 2016; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Christopher et al., 2011; Dunn et al., 2013; McCollum & Gehart, 2010). Helping professionals have considered these practices to be some of the most beneficial aspects of their training (Gockel & Deng, 2016; McCollum & Gehart,

2010; Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). Contemplative practice has already demonstrated its transformative utility, and the future hold greats promise for its power to impact, shape, and support the obstacles that can befall novice counselors.

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